

## YES CULTURE

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The brussels sprouts were good, the falafel was good, and the fries were better than good, but what Farmer and the Seahorse did spectacularly were its bathroom stalls. They were narrow and wood-walled with thick panels that went from ceiling to floor. The doors didn't vibrate with flimsiness. The bathroom was clean and private, and while the music in the corporate chic main dining room throbbed, the music inside was soft and reedy like ensembles of instruments carved from bamboo. I made a point of going to the bathroom whenever I had lunch at Farmer and the Seahorse. When I was in the bathroom, I stood in the locked stall and confirmed that, yes, it was a safe place. If I ever had to hide, I hoped it would happen while I was at Farmer and the Seahorse. My security checks in the bathroom were fueled by American gun rampages, but they began at the stake center in Salina, Kansas, when I was fourteen years old.

Our stake center was ninety miles from the town where I lived, but we made the hour-and-a-half drive for conferences and firesides, or in my terrifying case, stake dances for teenagers fourteen to eighteen. I hadn't been in the semi-dark, carpeted gym long when a young man I'd never met asked me to dance. He wasn't the kind of guy I was interested in as a teenager, or ever, but I said yes with an immediacy that, in retrospect, could have been mistaken for alacrity in the same way that an obtuse drill sergeant convinced himself that his recruits were fond of him because they were quick to respond in the affirmative.

I said yes because I was told to say yes. More to the point, I was told that I didn't have the right to say no. At church on the Sunday before

the dance, our Young Women leaders explained that because it was so difficult for young men to gather the courage to ask young women to dance, we were required to say yes the first time and encouraged to say yes ever after. The directive confused me. Wasn't that what got Satan kicked out of heaven—his plan to make people say yes? Then I wondered what was happening down the hall in the Young Men meeting. Were they equally schooled? Did the Young Men leaders explain how emotionally devastating it was for the Young Women who weren't asked to dance? Were the Young Men required to ask all of the Young Women at least once before going back for seconds? They were not.

After we danced, the young stranger asked again and again and again until I fled to the hallway for water. He was large and self-important, and he followed me to the fountain and hovered while I drank. Thinking spastically, I tried to pinpoint a place where I would be safe from him. It was difficult because he, a male, could go anywhere. The tucked-in alcove at the back of the chapel where the priests washed the sacrament trays? That was his rightful domain. The bishop's office? It might be his someday. It would never be mine. The mothers' room? They were mothers' rooms in name only. The doors didn't lock, and they had more toys for toddlers than they did comfortable seats for nursing women. There was one place, one place in the whole block-long rectangle of classrooms and meeting rooms and offices where I, a fourteen-year-old female, could be safely alone.

I locked myself in a stall and endured the humiliation of other, older teen girls whispering about the Mia Maid from Hays who was suffering severe gastric distress based on time inside. They knew it was me because the dividing panels stopped mid-calf, exposing the lower half of my floral dress and the emerald green flats chosen to match the stems and leaves. I didn't care about their whispers. No, I cared—I was fourteen—but I cared less about them than I did about being free from clammy hands and supercilious conversation. I prayed that he would be gone when I came out. He wasn't. He stepped in front of me when I tried to walk the other way. He was a predator.

Or, he was a teenage boy who fell as hard as I did for the practical joke my brother played that night. He surveyed the gym, picked out the guy I was least likely to be interested in and told him that I had a crush on him. When my brother confessed on the way home, I was relieved. It was possible that the young man was being persistent, not aggressive. He thought his dogged approach to filling his dance card was what we both wanted. Relief was short-lived. Joke aside, being at a stake dance had not been enjoyable. It had been an evening of Church-sanctioned lying. "Would you like to dance?" "Yes." It had been an evening of powerlessness. Hiding in the stall, I instinctively felt danger. Intellectually, I could not articulate or understand that feeling because I had been instructed in the culture of yes.

The inculturation began before I was a teenager. Our home teacher loved John Wayne. He was the father of four boys and held leadership positions in our branch. During childhood, my father wasn't a member, so this man came to my house and gave me a blessing when I broke my nose. He baptized me. Throughout those years, he called me "Little Missy," the John Waynism he felt most appropriate for cutting down to size the free-thinking girl he believed he had the right to corral. He believed he was my priesthood and patriarchal superior and, in the way of small-town congregations, he assumed he would one day be my father-in-law.

Being called "Little Missy" made me uncomfortable. The home teacher was trying to force a familiarity between us that did not and would never exist. When I was ten, I told him that I didn't like being called "Little Missy," and I asked him to stop. That was what I had been taught in school, "Just say no." Just say no to drugs. Just say no to strangers. Just say no to things that weren't good. When I told him it bothered me, he said, "Oh does it, Little Missy?" He used that pejorative until I graduated from high school and left town. It was my first experience with toxic patriarchy, and its poison was long lasting. It taught me that LDS girls lived a double set of rules. In the world but not of it meant that in the world I could say no to things but if I tried the same at church, the priesthood would not have it.

Brigham Young University doubled down on that teaching. In the required American Heritage class for freshmen, we watched a slide movie in which a young female student had to decide between a date with a guy who expected her consent for a weekly frozen yogurt outing or the athlete who asked her out for the same night. In class, the ethical debate centered on who the woman should say yes to first. Saying no to one or both wasn't discussed. Saying no was unethical.

For years, I couldn't say no. Part of that was personality and upbringing. In a home with strong temperaments, it was easier to agree outwardly and dissent inwardly. Away from home at BYU and beyond, I wasn't nonconfrontational so much as I was private. Because I still believed that being a good LDS woman meant I had to say yes, and because I was too much of a coward to figure out how to say no, I let big talkers mistake my passive response for tacit agreement and then felt confused by their anger when I didn't sign up as a downline recruit for their MLMs or was so bold as to contradict their interpretations of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as a morality play about sinful women because it ended with Edna's suicide. I said yes to ice-blocking and clogging and hiking the Y on dates even though they were activities that I found un compelling and with men I knew I wasn't compatible. Again, I felt confused by their anger when my disinterest seeped into their awareness.

At some point, I realized that anger was a byproduct of yes culture. Some Young Men were surely told that the Young Women had been instructed to say yes. "Don't be afraid to ask the girls to dance. They'll say yes. They have to!" In the frontal lobe-forming years, the brains and hormones of teenage LDS males had been steeped in the idea that a good woman said yes. The young men who weren't given pre-dance pep talks went in blind. Every time a young woman said yes, the young man doing the asking was led to believe that the girl wanted to dance with him. She wanted it.

Where the Church might have had a balancing effect, it chose not to. Where it might have steered its women for the many noes they would

need to say in order to hold to the rod, it muddied the waters instead. Unafraid of taking tough stances on temptations that might lead young Saints astray, the Church was maddeningly mixed up when it came to encouraging females to say no. No to sex before marriage, but yes to any man who hoped to lead you to marriage and sex? That was a winding, wobbly line to follow, but I followed it so exactly that I was a woman in my late twenties with two degrees who said forceful noes to the sexual overtures made by the nonmember men with whom I was intellectually and artistically compatible and pallid yeses to dates with members with whom I didn't connect. It got so bad that when I was serving as the Relief Society president in my YSA ward, I had my roommate call and tell me to come home so that I had an excuse to leave the apartment of a male ward member who was making dinner for me.

Days later, he called me out on the pathetic maneuver. I felt two things. First, shame. Shame for not realizing that he would see through the call and into my spinelessness. Second, anger. Anger that he didn't come up the way I did, groomed to make life easier for men. The shame and anger changed me. Not drastically, but by degrees. I still said yes to occasional dates with members hoping that I'd find someone from inside the margins to spend eternity with. When I didn't, when the biggest yes I ever got as an answer to prayer was to marry a nonmember, I said no to the naggers and naysayers and finger wagers.

Serving as the Young Women president in my ward as a newly married woman, a member of the stake presidency called me the night before I was to be a panel member during a question-and-answer session at a youth standards fireside. The presidency member said I was required to tell the youth that my marriage would be better if we had been sealed in the temple. I refused. Did Nephi tell his children that the plates would read better if he hadn't killed a man to get them? Why would I throw shade at the Lord's will when all I did was marry a man, one man, not multiples, and without shedding blood or breaking the Sabbath or any of the many things men in the scriptures did when the Lord commanded them to do something that was outside the norm?

When the presidency member pushed, I told him to find someone else to sit on the panel. It felt good to say no and follow it up with a more resounding no, but it also filled me with panic—as if I'd broken a commandment, committed a sin, kicked against the pricks.

The last time we cycled through the Old Testament in Sunday School, I was visiting my sister's ward when a brother said that Bathsheba consented. It couldn't be rape, he stated, because Bathsheba conceived. In his view, a woman could not say no to David. That was where yes culture got dangerous—when it went beyond dates and dances, when it bled into the interpretation of scripture and the scriptural interpretation of what defined a righteous woman. In yes culture, and perhaps in the time of the great King David, Bathsheba didn't have the right to say no. In terms of the covenants she made with God when she married Uriah, Bathsheba didn't have the right to say yes. She was caught between two masters: the king and his culture, and the King and his commandments. Righteous women have been walking the winding, wobbly line for millennia.

It doesn't change. Today, yes culture teaches that women must protect unborn life. They must say yes to carrying a pregnancy to term at all times and in all places. Yes culture also teaches that women cannot protect already born life. They cannot say no to broad interpretations of the Second Amendment. Embryos matter. Elementary schoolers do not. That is Sanhedrin-level hypocrisy. It centers on saying yes to men. Yes to their babies. Yes to their guns. Sure, women have babies and can get guns. The problem arises from a culture that allows men to mandate a controlling stake in both. Weapons and babies. That old, tired story. Bathsheba carried David's baby. David sent her husband to get killed on the front line. It began with the same common denominator, men raised on yes.

After David sent for Bathsheba, after she understood that he stood on his roof, looked into her home, observed her toilette and, worst of all, possibly watched her mikveh, did she run security checks? Enjoying

the ancient Israelite predecessor of falafel, did she, like me, habitually interrupt her meals and enclose herself in a place with floor to ceiling walls like the stalls at Farmer and the Seahorse?

For thousands of years, women have inured themselves to acculturation costumed as religion. In my life, it began when my home teacher refused to stop calling me names. I believed that name calling was something I had to say yes to. It was the gateway yes. I said yes to dances. Yes to dates. Yes to seeking safe places. Yes to dishonesty and double standards. Jesus himself said that no man can serve two masters. Nowhere did he say, "But a woman can." He didn't say it, because the Lord's gospel does not include the false morality of yes culture. Nor should his church. Nor should his people.

No, I didn't want to dance. No, I didn't want to date. No, I don't want to hide. No more. No. No. No.

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